



Changing Community Norms on Partner Abuse: A Project in Iztacalco, Mexico

Instituto Mexicano de Investigación de Familia y Población (IMIFAP)

As countries around the world involve women in economic and social development strategies, awareness of gender-based violence is increasing. Studies that examine this widespread problem often reveal alarming trends. Data emerging from Mexico in the 1990s have shown clear evidence of violence against women throughout the country, particularly in the form of spousal abuse.¹

For example, a household survey in the state of Jalisco indicated that 57 percent of urban and 44 percent of rural women had experienced physical and/or emotional violence (Ramírez and Uribe 1993). In the metropolitan area of Guadalajara, researchers found that 56 percent of respondents had suffered from violence, with partners the principal offender in nearly half of cases (Ramírez and Vargas 1997).

Such statistics have spurred anti-violence efforts by a range of organizations in Mexico. Some have focused on reforming the law and providing services to survivors of violence, while others have highlighted the treatment that abused women receive from public institutions such as the police, courts, and hospitals. Although significant progress has been made on these fronts, little has been done to evaluate and change the cultural norms, attitudes, and beliefs that keep women trapped in abusive relationships.²

To this end, the *Instituto Mexicano de Investigación de Familia y Población* (IMIFAP) (Mexican Institute for Research on Family and Population), in collaboration with the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE),³ initiated a research and demonstration study in 1997-99 in Iztacalco, a district of Mexico City. Since 1987, IMIFAP has worked on sexual and reproductive health issues through community mobilization, research, and education. With this project, IMIFAP recognized the links between its programs and the problem of domestic violence.

Objectives

The project aimed to challenge community norms that perpetuate violence towards intimate partners. Specific goals were to:

- Change the perception of abuse as a private problem that should

not be interfered with to a community issue that is everyone's responsibility;

- Encourage supportive responses by family and friends to women living in violent relationships;

- Help women suffering abuse realize that they are not to blame and that alternatives to their current situation exist.

¹ The studies cited here, as well as this brief, define violence against women as comprising psychological, physical, and sexual forms of abuse.

² The 1996 "Federal District Law for Attention and Prevention of Family Violence" created special law enforcement units for the victims of family violence and established procedures to assist parties to a conflict in reaching a formal agreement. In 1997, a series of reforms to the Civil and Penal Codes were approved by the President, making family violence a crime, including those acts for which there is no physical evidence.

³ Formerly known as the Health and Development Policy Project, CHANGE is internationally recognized for its work on violence against women and was fully involved in the design and implementation of this initiative.

The Project

Iztacalco is an area suffering from economic hardship and severe social problems, particularly among youth. Although a 1995 needs assessment found that residents identified alcoholism and violence as priority concerns, no local institutions were working to address the issue of family violence. A government-operated community center that has served low-income women and their families for 25 years was therefore designated as a site for the intervention, which was carried out in three phases, as follows.

Formative Research

Informal discussions were held with members of the community in order to identify the underlying norms that perpetuate violence against women. Five in-depth interviews were also conducted with women who had been abused. In addition, focus groups involved female and male adolescents and adults recruited from the community.⁴ The groups discussed several issues, including patterns of and attitudes toward intimate partner violence, intervention, and sources of support. The focus groups also followed an exercise describing the life of Rosita,

a woman who suffered abuse from her partner Victor, and the choices that she could make. This popular education technique was designed to elicit information and spontaneous responses in a less personal, threatening way than direct questioning.

Intervention

A 12-session pilot workshop aimed to form a cadre of local women (in particular, mothers and community leaders) who could model attitudes and behaviors, counsel abused women, and help identify support systems. Session topics included legal recourse, the use of violence to resolve conflicts and exert control, gender roles, the personal and social consequences of violence, alternatives for abused women, and crisis intervention skills. The second pillar of the intervention was a six-month community awareness and education campaign launched under the slogan “El que mete paz gana más” (“The peacemaker gains more”).⁵ Buttons and posters were distributed to residents and placed on shop fronts, lamp posts, and in local institutions. The poster featured the statement “La mujer maltratada te necesita” (“An abused woman needs



you”) and a list of four ways to help individuals. A photo story about a woman assisting an abused neighbor was also distributed. In addition, a group of adolescents developed and presented a play at a municipal festival on International Women’s Day.

Evaluation

The workshop sessions were evaluated through interviews with several participants at the beginning and at the end of the pilot workshop program. Pre- and post-test questionnaires administered to participants and an end-line survey carried out in the community also helped to assess progress.

Results

I don’t want to suffer...not to have anywhere to stay...not to have a roof over my head. I don’t want to suffer like so many people who don’t have...that is, who are out in the cold, hungry, dirty...I don’t want to end up like that.

-Denisse ⁶

Formative Research

Many participants expressed the

view that physical chastisement is a routine, acceptable part of family relations. Violent conflict resolution was considered to be a “necessary evil” in order to educate children and protect one’s image in the community. At the same time, many individuals considered violence to be related to bad upbringing, economic hardship, and the fact that violent men had often witnessed violence

between their parents during childhood or had been victims of violence themselves.

In general, partner violence was viewed in the community as a private issue and many residents were described as reluctant to get involved. Women were usually blamed for provoking or tolerating abuse. Male participants often

⁴ Because it proved difficult to recruit male participants, researchers interviewed some men on the street.

⁵ This was chosen to help transform the saying “El que mete paz, saca más” (“The peacemaker gets more than (s)he bargained for”), which is often invoked to discourage interference in situations of domestic violence.

⁶ All quotes are from interviews with abused women and participants in the workshop.

attributed violence to being “under pressure” as family breadwinners, “under the influence” of alcohol, or “driven to” it by their wives. The idea that men “only go as far as women want” was often invoked to avoid taking responsibility for violent acts.

Some women suggested that violence was an expected consequence of not having carried out their duties or having challenged male authority. Women currently involved in abusive relationships tended to emphasize the good points of their partner as a father or responsible provider. They also tried to avoid conflict or diffuse potentially violent situations in a variety of ways, including stereotypically feminine tactics such as tolerance, remaining silent, hiding, having sex, and obedience.

Women described many fears and obstacles that kept them from leaving their partners, including low self-esteem, fear of further violence, the absence of support from family and friends, hope that the partner would change, lack of income, and responsibility for children.⁷ Potential catalysts in the decision to separate included not being able to forget the violence, employment, and the situation’s negative effect on children.

Many women expressed embarrassment over disclosing their situation, in part because of a fear of gossip and in part because of not wanting

to place a financial burden on their relatives if they were to return home. However, they said that they would be more comfortable turning to female friends or relatives for help than seeking formal support services, and that when family members (particularly men) did intervene, violence decreased.

Legal sanctions did not appear to worry men, with many saying that if a woman accused them of violence, they would at most have to spend a few days in prison, but that they could always bribe police or civil servants involved in the case. Women did not feel supported by local police, who were characterized as inefficient, uncaring, and unwilling to intervene.

The Intervention

Before: *I wouldn’t ask, because it’s uncomfortable if you have a problem, and someone begins to ask you just for gossip.*

After: *First I would ask if it was the first time, what led up to it, how many times it had happened before, and if she was constantly being beaten. I would tell her that there are places where you can go and get guidance, so she can see, that is, what she wants to do.*

After the pilot workshop sessions, participants demonstrated greater empathy, were less judgmental

toward abused women, mentioned many reasons why a woman might remain with her partner, and expressed a greater willingness to offer assistance.⁸ Participants also possessed intervention skills and could identify support systems for women. Moreover, the workshop enabled those participants who suffered abuse to talk about their experiences and to be more aware of how they could obtain help.

Specifically, the pre- and post-test questionnaires contained 13 statements related to myths about domestic and partner violence. Correct responses to some of are indicated in the following table, which shows the percentage of respondents who refuted the stated myths.

Overall, the community campaign raised awareness and generated discussion about partner violence. According to the end-line survey, the proportion of residents who ranked domestic violence high among social problems increased from about 15 to 23 percent and the number of people who reported having witnessed an incidence of such violence went up from 30 to 36 percent. In addition, the proportion who said they would talk to an abused woman or her partner nearly tripled, from 11 to 30 percent. In terms of practical support, 24 percent of respondents mentioned “accompany her to a support center,” up from 10 percent.

Statement	Pre-test (% refuting)	Post-test (% refuting)
Sometimes it’s necessary to shout to make someone understand.	60	78
Victims of abuse sometimes ask for it, that is, they do something to provoke it.	60	88
Violence decreases over time in couple relationships.	56	67
When a woman stays with a man who abuses her, it’s because she likes being treated that way.	47	85

⁷ Although women who choose to leave should be fully supported in their decision, because the financial and social options for women in Iztacalco are extremely limited, this was not one of the goals of the intervention.

⁸ The pilot workshop had a significant spin-off effect: to date, nine more workshops have been held for 150 women in Iztacalco and four local women have received additional training on how to replicate the workshop.

Conclusions

Violence against women is a complex phenomenon with many manifestations, including spousal abuse. Formative research proved to

be an essential part of understanding the factors behind the problem. The project took small but sure steps forward in the process of creating a supportive environment for abused

women. It made a significant contribution regarding how to develop, implement, and evaluate norms-based interventions.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Although this project was based on one community in Mexico, it provides useful starting points for similar projects in other settings. Recommendations to support this process are as follows:

► **Understand the setting.** Formative research is crucial to establishing realistic goals. Awareness of where a community “is at” ensures that interventions are culturally appropriate and address local needs.

► **Share control.** Projects should involve women’s groups and community organizers. Links with governmental and nongovernmental organizations involved in community development and outreach should also be established.

► **Support success.** To ensure the sustainability of an intervention, it is crucial to support the cadre of

women who serve as mentors. Follow-up training and supervision can enable them to establish informal networks of women interested in reducing abuse and helping victims.

► **Everyone matters.** Norms-based interventions should include not only women, but men, children, and adolescents as well. Similarly, key messages and campaign materials should be tailored to fit the knowledge and abilities of different target groups.

During the course of the project, important lessons were learned:

► **Every step counts.** Measuring the success of a domestic violence intervention can be problematic, particularly if it has a short timeframe. Change should be viewed not only in terms of absolute

reductions in violence, but with regard to the incremental formation of new beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

► **Workshops have lasting effects.**

While the workshops did not aim to be therapeutic, they were participatory and demanded high levels of self-reflection. Through sharing experiences and views, participants formed a unique bond that promises greater community cohesion and involvement.

► **People are apt to care.** Project findings indicate that, despite initial resistance, many community members were inclined to take certain steps to help abused women. Building on such positive attitudes can facilitate interventions and spur the development of a more supportive environment for abused women.

References

Ramírez, J. C. and G. Uribe. 1993.

“Mujer y violencia: Un hecho cotidiano.” *Salud Pública de México* 35(2):148-160.

Ramírez, J. C. and P. N. Vargas. 1997.

¿Qué tan serio es el problema de la violencia contra la mujer? Algunas datos para la discusión. Presentation at the VII Congreso Nacional de Investigación en Salud Pública. Cuernavaca, México.

International Center for Research on Women
1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 302
Washington, DC 20036, USA
Tel: (202) 797-0007; Fax: (202) 797-0020
www.icrw.org

The Centre for Development and Population Activities
1400 16th St., NW
Washington, DC 20036, USA
Tel: (202) 667-1142; Fax: (202) 332-4496
www.cedpa.org

Information for this brief was taken from:

IMIFAP. 1999. “Changing Community Norms toward Wife Abuse: A Research and Demonstration Project in Iztacalco, Mexico.” Final end-of-project report for PROWID to the International Center for Research on Women.

For additional information and project-related documents, please contact:

Susan Pick or Gillian Fawcett Garcia
IMIFAP
Malaga Norte 25, Col. Insurgentes Mixcoac
Mexico City, Mexico 03920
Tel: (52) (5) 611-35-75; Fax: (52) (5) 563-62-39
Email: pick@imifap.org.mx; gillian@imifap.org.mx

The publication of this report is made possible through the Promoting Women in Development (PROWID) program, funded by the Office of Women in Development at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the terms of Cooperative Agreement No. FAO-A-00-95-00030-00. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, ICRW, or CEDPA.

Copyright© 1999 International Center for Research on Women and The Centre for Development and Population Activities